



NORM COLEMAN

UNITED STATES SENATOR • MINNESOTA



Improving No Child Left Behind

by Senator Norm Coleman

In 2002, almost exactly one year before I took office, the President signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act, which sought to ensure that our children are receiving the best education possible by increasing accountability and measuring results in order to close achievement gaps that existed in our education system. And while No Child Left Behind has certainly led to significant, measurable improvements in a number of areas, the law has also presented some challenges that need to be addressed.

With the law up for reauthorization, we need to address No Child Left Behind's weaknesses without weakening the bill's accountability measures.

I've heard time and time again from educators around state about the inflexibility of the No Child Left Behind Act, and the negative effects it is having on teachers, students, schools and school districts as a whole. Even in Minnesota, where we have always been a national leader in educating our children, this inflexibility has sometimes led to strong schools being classified as not meeting the "Adequate Yearly Progress" requirement of the law - even when they have shown positive results by an overwhelming majority of individual students. The inflexibility in terms of how students are measured, how individual progress is weighed and the effects of one specific group on the entire school is major impediment of the current law.

To address these aspects of the law, I, along with my colleagues Senator Lieberman (D-CT) and Senator Landrieu (D-LA), have introduced the All Students Can Achieve Act.

One of the best features of our legislation is that it will allow states to measure individual student growth over time instead of relying on - and teaching for - one test administered on one day. Measuring a student's growth over time benefits both students and teachers because it recognizes that students have different starting points and acknowledges their individual progress. This approach will free teachers from the burden of teaching for one high-stakes test, while still giving parents the assurances they need that their children are learning in a high quality atmosphere. Minnesota has been trying for some time to move to this "growth model" of evaluation and our bill provides the funding to develop and implement the data systems our state would need to move to such a model.

Our bill also addresses something I have been particularly focused on- ensuring that the next generation has the math, science and foreign language skills needed to be competitive in an increasingly global economy. As countries like China or India develop increasingly skilled workforces, we must ensure that American students do not fall behind in these critical and

highly relevant fields. Our legislation adds a science assessment to the accountability system and gives states the option to bring in qualified science, math and foreign language practitioners to assist teachers and students.

Another concern I hear in Minnesota is that a school can be, in effect, penalized if a specific sub-group - such as new immigrants or students with learning disabilities - does not test as well as long-time students in the same school. The All Students Can Achieve Act will replace the current all-or-nothing approach with a system that makes a distinction between schools that need comprehensive interventions, versus those that need more focused help. In other words, while current law groups all low-performing schools together regardless of how many students miss Adequate Yearly Progress, our legislation offers a more targeted approach, sending additional resources toward schools with pervasive problems, while allowing schools that just have one or more low-performing subgroups to focus on closing the achievement gap with that particular group.

A final aspect of our legislation is that it would change the way teachers are evaluated. Currently under No Child Left Behind, good teachers have to jump through a number of bureaucratic hoops to demonstrate on paper that they are "qualified" experts in the subjects they teach. I understand this has been a serious burden, particularly in rural communities, where very good teachers provide instruction in more than one subject. I also know as a parent, that a teacher's résumé may or may not reflect their actual abilities in the classroom. That's why our legislation provides states with new flexibility in the ways they rate and reward excellent teachers.

At its core, No Child Left Behind is about closing the achievement gap. We still have a long way to go - recent data shows that still only 13 percent of African American and 19 percent of Hispanic 4th graders scored at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress mathematics test, compared to 47 percent of their white peers. By measuring teacher effectiveness, school quality, and student learning, our legislation will help reduce this unacceptable disparity in America today.

Our bipartisan legislation is based on recommendations from a panel of experts, and has been endorsed by some leading educators. However, we know it is just the beginning of a conversation about how and where to add flexibility to the No Child Left Behind law.

With another school year in full swing, I welcome the advice of teachers, parents, and administrators on how best to help all Minnesota students moving forward.